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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment is one concern of women graduate students in community psychology programs. When a sexual relationship exists between male faculty and female students, the distribution of power reflects the subordinate status of women and the dominant position of men. Many studies have documented the negative consequences of sexual contact between faculty and students. Walker, Erickson, and Woolsey (1985) suggest three sets of ethical issues raised by such contact: (1) unwanted sexual advances limit the victim's ability to choose when and with whom she will have a sexual relationship; (2) sexualization of a professional relationship interferes with mentoring; and (3) the mentor abuses his power to obtain personal gratification. Sexual harassment within academia may be understood within a framework which suggests that competing moralities are likely to perpetuate such behaviors. A lack of understanding between men and women about what a common set of behaviors means and a difference in perspectives on the role of relationships in the work environment may result in conflict. Community psychology programs can create an environment compatible with the needs of women students by recognizing faculty responsibility to provide equal opportunity to female graduate students in a climate free from sexual intimidation and by calling on universities to foster an empowering climate for these students. (NB)

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SEXUAL HARASSMENT OF WOMEN GRADUATE STUDENTS: THE IMPACT OF INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

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This paper was presented as part of a symposium, entitled "Sexual Harassment: A problem for Community Psychology Training Programs", at the annual meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association, Chicago, May, 1987. This paper is the result of a collaborative relationship between the two authors who contributed equally to its preparation.

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As we have heard from Meg Bond, one concern of women graduate students in Community programs are the problems created by sexual harassment. The Division has begun to respond to this problem with the endorsement by the Executive Committee last August of a resolution condemning sexual harassment.

In addition to adopting such resolutions of condemnation, Community psychologists can contribute to understanding the causes of sexual harassment of women graduate students by applying an ecological perspective of problems of person-environment fit. By looking at the societal and organizational contexts within which female graduate students are trained, we can arrive at an understanding of the etiology of the problem which may then suggest the appropriateness of reaffirmation of a commitment to principles of equal opportunity.

There has been considerable disagreement in the literature on a definition of sexual harassment. 1980 Guidelines of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission suggest that sexual harassment be defined as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature which occur under one of three conditions: 1) submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment; 2) submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting such individual; or 3) such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or

creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive working environment.

A narrow reading of these guidelines could exclude any behavior that does not include clearly coercive interactions. A more liberal interpretation would lead to inclusion of a large number of interactions in all of our daily repertoires. The question of interpretation will be addressed a bit later, but for now let me talk of prevalence given this definition. In their 1985 survey of 287 female doctorates in psychology, Robinson and Reid (1985) implicitly defined sexual harassment as any seduction by faculty of graduate students, or as any sexual contact between faculty and graduate students, a seemingly more inclusive definition. Implicit in Robinson and Reid's definition is the assumption that a sexual relationship between a more powerful male, who controls access to resources,and a less powerful female in an organizational setting is necessarily harassing. The validity of such an assumption has been suggested in the literature on sexual harassment, and is compatible with an ecological perspective on the negative consequences of abuse of a power differential. There are a number of large studies documenting the negative consequences of sexual contact between faculty and students. We recognize that our arguments hold if these groups that are the targets of study are truly representative of students who have had sexual contact with faculty members. For those who would wish to claim otherwise--that there is an unstudied group of women who have sexual relationships, as students, with male faculty members and have not experienced adverse consequences, such a sample needs to be

identified and if such a sample can be identified, spefication of factors which differentiate their experience of sexual involvement from those of women who report adverse consequences would be very useful for preventive efforts aimed at limiting negative consequences. Until then we define such interactions as objectionable and harassing not based on a moralistic perspective or a particular set of prudish values but based on empirical assessment of the outcomes reported by women themselves.

Tangri, Burt and Johnson (1982) suggest three views of harassment: first, harassment as the consequence of a natural sexual attraction between two individuals; second, harassment as condoned by the climate, structure and pattern of authority relations within an organization. and finally, harassment as a mechanism by which men maintain dominance over women in the work place and in the economy as a whole.

Adopting an individual level of analysis, whether one focused on victim blame or psychopathology of the harasser, appears to ignore the prevalence data; in addition, an institutional or sociocultural explanation is much more compatible with an ecological perspective. Russell (1984) adopts such a sociocultural position in suggesting that sexual harassment may be seen as a form of social control by which women are kept in their rightful subordinate roles. This limiting of women's status in the work place is seen as a natural response on the part of men to women's attempts to gain more power by leaving their appropriate places in the home, in order to achieve equality in the work place. By sexualizing interactions with

women in the work place, men call attention to women's sexuality thereby detracting from women's work. Ultimately, women's ambitions are curtailed (Goodman, 1978). Sexual harassment is viewed as an appropriate behavior for men within the context of typical patterns of relationships between powerful men and powerless women. And organizations, by advocating most strongly for the rights of their most powerful individual members, condone such actions.

The perception of such interactions as harassing by women may occur because of a lack of fit between the perspective with which they have been socialized, and prevailing organizational norms. That relationships with coworkers are valued by women more than by men has been documented by a number of researchers (Dubin et al., 1976; Nieva and Gutek, 1981). Women appear to routinely see the development of close relationships as part of a group of crucial work role behaviors. Men, on the other hand, appear to value different aspects of work than do women, and do not see the formation of relationships as central. However, they might see the formation of sexual relationships with women as appropriate role-relevant behaviors if organization socialization prescribed the formation of sex-role stereotypic relationships among employees. Such a dynamic exists in situations in which power relationships between men and women mirror the power differentials in larger society, that is, when men control access to resources by less powerful women. Such a balance most often exists between male mentors and female students.

There are other crucial ways in which men's and women's perceptions of social reality have been found to differ.

Linenberger (1983) states:

> Employers and employees are aware that two well-intentioned people could thoroughly misread each other's signals. What one person intends or views as a compliment might be classified by another as sexual harassment.

Although Linenberger's comments may be taken as indicative of widespread disagreements on what constitutes harassment distributed in random fashion across the population, these differences break down in rather consistent patterns. Gutek (Note 1) and other researchers have consistently noted differences between men and women in their evaluation of the propriety of sexual attention in the work place. Gutek has noted that males are more likely than females to see women as flattered by sexual attention in the work place, Tangri, Burt and Johnson (1982) noted that for each kind of harassing behavior about which respondents to their survey were asked, more women than men said that the behavior would bother them and that they would view it as harassing.

These differences in the perception of harassment appear consistent with more general differences in perceptions of social reality described by Gilligan and others. In describing problems in marital relationships, for example, Gilligan (Note 2) has suggested that men and women share an overlapping moral vocabulary, but attach different meanings to its words. Two recent cases of sexual harassment provide examples of this. In the first, the defendant suggested that "the tone of the conversation was not meant to be offensive" (New York Times, June

1, 1982); in the other the defendant stated that "normal, affectionate pats on the shoulder were misinterpreted by the women" (New York Times, March 23, 1984). In response to appeals from women to right the injustice of sexual harassment often come claims of misunderstanding and exaggerated sensitivity.

Powell (1986) suggests that when definitions of sexual harassment are vague, individuals invoke their own definitions. We would suggest that even rather explicit definitions are often differently understood by men and women. It is likely that social status is related to definitions of behaviors as harassing, for women, who have little ascribed social status, are more likely than men to see power as an issue in harassment, and to experience sexual harassment as a put down.

When the relationship is one between male faculty and female students, the distribution of power reflects the subordinate status of women, and the dominant position of men, in society (Walker, Erickson & Woolsey, 1985). Thus, male mentors may initiate sexual activity with female students in order to take advantage of the privilege which is their due because they have more social status, and because women are to be kept in their place. And female students may respond because they have been taught that the prerogative of powerful males is sexual access to powerless women.

The response of women students may initially be positive, although it may quickly become ambivalent. Robinson and Reid (1985) found that, in retrospect, 96% of female doctorates who reported that they had had sexual contact with or were seduced by male faculty believed that the experience was detrimental to at

least one party.

Walker, Erickson and Woolsey (1985) suggest that at least three sets of ethical issues are raised in this situation. First, unwanted sexual advances limit the victim's ability to choose when and with whom she will have a sexual relationship, an important aspect of control of her life. Second, the sexualization of a professional relationship interferes with the primary task of mentoring, compromising the trust placed in the teacher by both the student and the academy. Finally, the mentor abuses his power in order to obtain personal gratification, denying the victim's right to full participation in the academic system.

Gilligan (1977,1982) and others have suggested that men and women may make decisions based on different assumptions about morality. One, a morality of rights in which justice is defined by notions of reciprocity, has been tied to male development. This morality employs a logic of fairness,rather than the logic of relationships and connectedness, which women are more likely to invoke.

Lyons (1983) in particular has suggested that since women are more likely to define individuals as connected in relation to others, those others are seen in their own situations and contexts. The morality of care rests on relationships as responses to others in their own terms. The observation that some women are likely to remain within harassing relationships because they do not want to hurt their harassers (Livingston, 1982), and because they generally perceive relationships as

protective (Pollak and Gilligan, 1982) is much more comprehensible when one adopts such a perspective.

The prevailing morality of academic institutions is characterized by respect for the autonomy of individuals, and for the integrity of people as separate from those around them. The occurrence and maintenance of sexual harassment within academia may now be understood within a framework which suggests that competing moralities are likely to perpetuate such behaviors. Because there is a lack of understanding between men and women about what a common set of behaviors mean and a difference in perspectives on the role of relationships in the work environment, conflict is likely to result. When conflict does result, the institution is likely to provide support for an articulation of professional role behaviors that is more consistent with the definitions of those in power. Harassment continues to remain a problem because the morality of universities is one which maintains the sanctity of individual rights of dominance. Women perpetuate harassment only insofar as they value the centrality of caring relationships with mentors at their own expense.

One component of enhancing person-environment fit is empowerment of the individual and, in 1979, Rima Blair suggested that community psychologists need to examine institutional practices that lead to unequal distribution of power betweeen the sexes in our discipline. She called for models of professional training that empower rather than intimidate.

As Rappaport and Danish have suggested, community psychology can be the social conscience for the discipline as a whole. By

recognizing the responsibility of faculty to provide equal opportunity to female graduate students to acquire the expertise of the discipline in a climate that is free from sexual intimidation, and by calling on departments and universities to foster an empowering climate, by validating perspectives on professional relationships of female graduate students, we can create a new ethic that will refuse to blame the victim, and that will create an environment that will be more compatible with the needs of women students.

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